

Training the uniforms: gender and peacekeeping operations

Angela Mackay

A complex setting, a difficult task

At face value it is a simple idea – training peacekeepers on ‘gender’. At the same time, the suggestion that peacekeepers should be required to receive training on ‘the protection, special needs, and human rights of women and children in conflict situations’¹ is close to revolutionary. That the idea was initiated by leading national politicians and advanced vigorously within the United Nations only adds to the surprise that this project should be deemed so radical.

Approximately three years ago, former Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy and former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright agreed to support the development of a training programme on ‘gender’ for civilian and military personnel working on peacekeeping missions. The preamble to the Charter of the United Nations – ‘We the peoples of the United Nations determined to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women’ – had proved difficult to live up to. Peacekeeping missions in the previous decade, including Cambodia, Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, embodied graphic demonstrations of the failure of member states to honour their commitments. At the same time, peacekeeping forces had been found wanting in their own behaviour, both in terms of flaunting such undertakings and of failing to protect the populations they were sent to serve.

The complex environment of modern, multifaceted, and multi-organisational missions makes the expectations enunciated in the Charter particularly ambitious and challenging. All the rules have changed from earlier traditional peacekeeping missions. The days in which UN peacekeepers merely patrolled a dividing line between two opposing forces in an attempt to create a space in which peace might

be explored and developed are long gone. These days, peacekeepers face mass movements of displaced people, of whom the vast majority are women and children. They also have to deal with war crimes such as torture, rape, and ethnic cleansing on an unprecedented scale, as well as turn their hands to disarmament and demobilisation campaigns, provide security to besieged settlements, and confront vicious, armed, and traumatised child soldiers. And they have to do all this often with little or no specific preparation or training.

Nevertheless, the changes in social structures as a result of conflict are beginning to be understood. The fact that war changes roles and responsibilities within society, while exposing men and women of all ages and classes to new threats and opportunities, has become increasingly recognised. Civil wars disrupt and destroy civilian life. Men leave, die in combat, are brutalised, lose employment, or resort to despair, violence, or apathy. Women assume enormous burdens of work and all manner of different tasks and responsibilities, they lose their security and their protectors, and they are also victimised and marginalised.

Into this confusing and dynamic mix come the peacekeepers, scarcely trained for the nature of their interface with civilians and certainly unversed in the gender implications of an unknown society. Axworthy and Albright's idea came at an opportune moment. That moment was almost jettisoned when Senator Jessie Helms found out about it, and then blocked any financial contribution by the USA to a project with Canada, declaring that Canada was not a 'developing' country. Luckily, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) joined the project with Canada. In February 2000, the sponsors shared the first draft of the training package with a number of UN agencies, military bodies, governments, and NGOs. Following comment and revision, the final product was delivered in late 2000.

This initial training package, titled *Gender and Peace Support Operations*, was developed to cover a three-day training session and was aimed at a broad cross-section of the peacekeeping community – not specifically military or civilian institutions – and to serve as a body of reference material to be delved into, developed, and customised by interested organisations. The project undertaken by the Training and Evaluation Service (TES) of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) at the United Nations has done just that, embarking on a customised training package specifically for the 'uniforms' – military and civilian police.

This initiative has been reinforced by surprising moves within the United Nations. Since its inception, the United Nations has developed conventions, issued guidelines, defined strategies, and issued resolutions to strengthen the hand of all the actors seeking to uphold fundamental human rights principles. Since 1948 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, great distances have been travelled in the continuous efforts to keep the issues relating to equal rights for men and women not only in the spotlight, but moving forward. The series of conferences on human rights and specifically on the advancement of women – which have been held in Mexico, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing – have focused on efforts to achieve gender equality, to eliminate obstacles and discrimination against women, to end violence against women, and to respect women’s human rights.

Moreover, in June 2000, the UN General Assembly held a special session titled ‘Women 2000: Gender, Equity, Development, and Peace for the Twenty-first Century’, and in October of that year, in a more unusual move, the Security Council, in open debate, focused on gender, equality, and peace. This resulted in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), a strong affirmation of the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflict. It stresses the importance of the full involvement of women in all aspects of promoting and maintaining peace and security and the need to increase their role in decision making. It specifically recommends specialised training for peacekeepers on the protection, special needs, and human rights of women and children.

Training packages for ‘the uniforms’

Simultaneously, in October 2000, the TES began developing a customised training package for ‘the uniforms’. This initially involved seeking out any existing suitable materials and discussing the needs and key features of such a training package with various personnel from the DPKO and other UN agencies.

It rapidly became apparent that there existed little or nothing on the subject that could be used or transformed for military purposes. At the same time, there was unanimous consensus that the material should be practical and concrete and that the training should last for no more than one day. This material is to be provided to trainers in the nations that contribute troops, since the training of peacekeepers is always a national responsibility. The task of the United Nations is to provide

training materials and advice and to train trainers. The 'gender' project involved developing a package for use by trainers for pre-deployment and ultimately a handbook to be given to all troops to keep in their pockets or in their kit.

The aim was to provide adequate background reading material for the trainer to become familiar with the subject; to provide a variety of options for presenting the material, with questions pitched at participants of different ranks and levels of responsibility, and additional materials to stretch the minds of those with a particular interest or to use at further training sessions. Very little, if any, reading was expected of the participants, who would be provided only with a basic record of the key points covered in the course.

The material was developed using a 'rights-based approach'. This approach was used for a number of reasons. It allows the presenters to distance themselves from the material so that discussing human rights does not become a case of the trainer's version of morality, or anyone's view of what is 'right' or 'wrong'. It allows for an emphasis on the fact that, as UN staff, peacekeepers are supported and protected by human rights conventions as well as expected to uphold and promote human rights. Those rights provide a standard by which they are expected to operate and the standard by which they will be assessed. The aim was also to foster the notion of personal responsibility as well as the response of the military within the mission.

In the best of training traditions, the course, somewhat ambitiously, intended to do three things – provide knowledge and information on how the relationships between men and women and their gender roles and responsibilities are transformed by violent conflict; develop basic skills of gender analysis and a recognition of the differing needs, capacities, and expectations of men and women; and make peacekeepers aware of the implications of their actions.

The content focused on three principal topics. The first was *What is Gender?*; the second *Gender and Human Rights*; and the third *What Can I Do?* The general feeling was that a considerable amount of time needs to be spent on the definition of gender, on clarifying the distinction between gender and sex, and on clearly establishing in the participants' minds that gender is socially constructed, that it changes, and that war creates a dynamic environment in which all social roles, responsibilities, and expectations can be dramatically altered. Once this is well understood, the participants get to test their analytical skills by examining simple case studies to identify the 'gender' issues and their implications.

Gender and Human Rights is the next piece of the puzzle, providing participants with a list of objective criteria upon which to base their actions and a universal set of standards to help them through the contradictory maze of options they need to consider in a peacekeeping operation. Once more, after a discussion and exploration of what human rights are all about, specific gender-based issues are presented as problems for participants to discuss. Resolution of these problems is often difficult, if not impossible. This is intended to underline once again the ambiguity of the environment in which the participants will operate.

In the concluding module, the participants are encouraged to assume personal responsibility by thinking of the actions they themselves may take in a peacekeeping mission in order to ensure their own gender sensitivity – as well as of tasks they might assign others in their command or suggest to senior officers.

An emotional, political, and cultural challenge

The issue with gender training material is the emotional rather than the intellectual challenge it presents. From the outset, it is at some level a politicised discussion. It strikes at the centre of everyone's being, male or female, because it is about beliefs, values, practices, expectations, and attitudes that identify every one of us. Long-held assumptions are likely to be challenged, issues of power and control confronted, and a demand made to look at the world from a different perspective. Another area of potential trouble is that, given the military propensity for checklists, there is always a danger that material on gender sensitisation is simply ticked off from a list alongside landmines, HIV/AIDS, or driving skills.

At the same time there is a lack of tough, clearly defined and enforceable standards for the behaviour of military and police peacekeepers. A code of conduct exists but its effectiveness is ultimately guaranteed only by the commanders who enforce it. In addition, no matter what training material is produced, the issue of sovereignty prevents the United Nations from making it enforceable. UN personnel can suggest, request, persuade – but not enforce or insist on the delivery of training. This may change in the future with 'lead' nations suggesting that they draw up a list of training requirements for all incoming contingents, who will be rejected if they do not comply. This proposal has been mentioned by senior Australian officers as a result of the experience in East Timor.²

Field testing the training package

This training package was piloted during field tests conducted in the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) mission in February 2001. Three sessions were conducted for international military peacekeepers, one for UN civilian police, and one for the Timor Lorosa'e Police School cadets (in translation). Each class had approximately 25 participants.

The principal lesson learned from this pilot is that material needs to be presented in the utmost simplicity. Language, concepts, and examples need to be discussed in the most basic of formats and a variety of different training techniques need to be used to convey the material. Most participants in the pilot were first-time peacekeepers with no previous experience on which to draw, little knowledge of other peacekeeping efforts, and remarkably little imagination. There was also a wide range of participants in the classroom, from corporal to colonel, a fact that inhibited discussion among the more hierarchical cultures, in which senior officers are always shown deference.

Poor English-language skills prevented many participants from joining the discussion, asking questions, or registering their understanding. This would not be a problem, of course, in a monolingual group in which a single language could be used.

Working as self-starting groups exploring problems together was not a developed skill in most cases. Participants would generally defer to the senior person present and were reluctant to voice an opinion.

For pre-deployment training, the material should be broad and generic, incorporating a wealth of different examples. For in-mission training, it will be important to contextualise and offer local examples whose relevance the peacekeepers will immediately be able to test.

Overall, the training was well received but was too ambitious, seeking to fill an enormous void in the thinking and worldview of the majority of the peacekeepers. The tension between gender and culture was expected and inevitable, and discussions on the topic needed to be managed skilfully in order to avoid lapsing into using culture as an excuse for inaction. The contradictory views of those who professed they cannot interfere to stop violence against women because 'wife beating is a part of the local culture' but at the same time declared they 'wanted to help' and 'make a difference' seemed to be missed without being properly problematised.

An enormous distance remains to be covered for this material to be understood in any meaningful depth. There is need for repetition and

reinforcement at the national and the international level, among all ranks of peacekeepers, and in particular among the senior ranks who, it is too often assumed, know and understand. Without their commitment, the 'simple soldier' lacks support and reinforcement for any positive steps taken in the gender arena.

However, merely having a first draft in addition to all the lessons learned from the field test is a great step forward for the DPKO. Backed by Secretary General Kofi Annan's response to the recent Brahimi Report,³ which analysed the way peacekeeping is currently done and how it can be improved, this training project is in good company and strikes a timely chord. Annan's response made three specific references to the gender question: there should be more training on International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and gender issues; there should be a mixed-sex team to go from HQ to missions to conduct training for senior managers; and there is to be a strengthened mandate for integrating a gender perspective in peace operations – including a better gender balance in senior appointments and greater attention to sensitivity among personnel in their interactions with the population.

Now the work continues to incorporate the necessary changes identified from the field test and to be tested again and again in different settings before making the package available to all member states and to the new mission training cells.

Sustainable peace and gender relations

It is essential that peacekeepers of all nations, be they military, civilian police, or civilian, understand the significance of gender relations in the work they undertake. Without an understanding of how the relations between women and men are structured, how they are affected by violent conflict, and how the mere presence of peacekeepers further affects those relations, there can be little meaningful progress in the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations. Sadly, recent experience has demonstrated the negative effects on a population that is experiencing conflict with the presence of peacekeepers who lack sensitivity, or who in some way betray the principles and standards established by the United Nations. Their failure to conform to these standards and to respect the interests, needs, and desires of the population, particularly the women, has weakened their legitimacy and their effectiveness.

Women, who constitute the bulk of the civilian population affected by warfare, have typically been either overlooked by the warring parties

and peacekeepers alike, who in both cases regard them as ‘victims’, as helpless bystanders, as targets for abuse, or as dispensable commodities. This overwhelming disregard for over 50 per cent of the population in situations of armed conflict has resulted in the iniquitous treatment of women by those expected to act in their interests.

An additional tragedy is that the resources committed to peacekeeping – both human and material – fail to realise their potential. A ‘peace’ that neglects the interests of a large part of the community, or that supports, reconstructs, and in some cases strengthens the inequities in the power structure, relegating women to roles of subordination and inferiority, cannot truly be called a peace worth having – and is unlikely to be sustainable.

It is important that peacekeepers reflect and practise the principles for which the United Nations stands, that they ensure that a society in conflict is in better shape after they leave than it was before they came, and that all members of society have equal access to the blessings of peace. That much of the reconstruction effort is about the relationships between men and women is easy to say, harder to understand, and even harder to practise. To grasp the fact that almost every activity, policy, programme, or project is in some way ‘gendered’ is extremely challenging. To appreciate the enormity of this fact takes time, interest, and intellectual energy.

This training manual is designed to enable instructors to read, prepare, and deliver basic training on the meaning and implications of gender and peace support operations. It is intended to be practical, concrete, and useful. It provides numerous examples, based on real-life experiences or situations, so the participants can constantly test their understanding of the concepts and their ability to discover responses and ideas for solving problems.

There are often no right answers, only better ones. In the disruption and confusion that accompany violent conflict and its aftermath, it is supremely difficult to determine and retain clear priorities. Some will argue that, at such times, gender considerations are not high on this list of priorities. This would be a profound mistake, for gender relations, their implications, and their outcomes are at the root of any society, and to neglect them will not only be to our collective detriment, but will also be wasteful, counter-productive, and will not contribute to a lasting peace.

Notes

- 1 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), New York.
- 2 Conversations with Mike Smith, Deputy Force Commander, UNTAET, and Andrew Mackinnon, Department of Defence, Canberra, Australia.
- 3 The Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations commissioned by the United Nations Secretary General and first published in October 2000 (A/55/305 – S/2000/80) is commonly known after its chairperson as the Brahimi Report.